



## Stark County Court of Common Pleas –Domestic Relations and Juvenile Divisions

Judge Jim D. James

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### Programs, partners and collaborative efforts

The Stark County Family Court has combined the Domestic Relations Division and the Juvenile Division of the Court of Common Pleas for over 40 years. The Family Court offers much efficiency as Judges and Magistrates hear cases across both divisions of the Court, it eliminates administrative duplication, and all of the Court services are offered throughout the entire county.

#### Collaborative efforts

- 1) Cooperation and collaboration–The Court is an active participant with most child serving agencies within the county. This involvement means that efforts to collaborate are considered in every grant application, and in every service that is or can be delivered to juveniles and families. The Judges and staff of the Court sit on agency boards within the county and partner in task force work to efficiently and effectively deliver services to children and families. A major piece of this work came in the Comprehensive Strategies Project in which a community plan was put together on behalf of many community partners. Over 100 citizens, agency personnel, law enforcement, elected officials, and court staff participated in this project.

- 2) Family Council-The Court is actively involved in collaborative efforts to deliver services to juveniles and families in an efficient and effective way. The Court is a part of a Service Coordination Committee agreement with schools, Mental Health and Recovery Services Board, DJFS Children Services Division, Developmental Disabilities Board, United Way and other child serving agencies in the county. Family Council has a process for determining the needs of children and families and authorizes funds for the payment of necessary treatment services. These flexible funds are often used to provide services for children and families so that they can maintain their child in the least restrictive setting often avoiding the need for high placement costs.
- 3) Multi-County Juvenile Attention System-The Court is part of a five county consortium that offers detention and treatment services to juveniles and their families. Detention and a continuum of treatment services are offered to the Court in various locations across the five counties, saving administrative and other costs to our County.

#### Diversion programs

- 4) Truancy Mediation-This program is a partnership with a number of school districts and the Community Mediation Center of Stark County. The Court provides trained mediators to local school districts. Elementary, middle and high schools are able to mediate issues of attendance with parents, students and school officials to prevent serious truancy from developing. A recent study revealed that the average number of absences dropped by 51% after mediation was completed.
- 5) Truancy Diversion Court-The Court in cooperation with schools and Children Services offers expedited hearings when truancy is a concern. Time is set aside weekly within the Court's assignment docket for approved cases to be heard when referred by the schools. The Prosecutor's Office usually approves the cases and an assigned Intake Officer notifies all parties to appear, normally within two weeks. Children Services assists the Court in providing background information and recommendations for diversion of the case out of the formal juvenile justice system. The Court monitors these cases for a period of time before the cases are closed.
- 6) Teen Court-This diversion program operates in cooperation with schools, The United Way of Greater Stark County, and the Court. It has been in operation since 1995 and offers diversion for juveniles charged on their first offense and charged with a misdemeanor. Students from Massillon, Perry, Canton, Glen-Oak, Marlinton and Alliance make the sentencing decisions on cases referred to the Teen court. Recidivism runs extremely low for this program. This program also offers the teen participants a real look at the roles of the participants in the juvenile court process. Teen Court closes about 500 cases through the efforts of staff and utilizes 150 student volunteers each year.

- 7) Unruly Diversion-This program is designed to offer needed support to families with out of control adolescents. The Court and the Stark County Family Council meet with family members and the juvenile when juveniles have been charged with an offense of unruliness. Parent support, advocacy, parent to parent mentoring, and counseling is offered to the families.
- 8) Wraparound programming-In cooperation with the Stark County Family Council the Court is able to have team meetings with families in order to program for their children. Wraparound is a service of Family Council, providing intensive support to families and children who are at risk of removal from their homes. Support and or service are recommended by a team to the families to assist in keeping them intact. The Wraparound Department is funded by the Mental Health and Recovery Services Board, Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Board, Children Services, schools, and the Court.
- 9) Disproportionate Minority Contact-The Court is the recipient of a grant from the Department of Youth Services designed to closely review the number of minority youth coming in contact with the Juvenile Court. The Court is providing programming through Community Services of Stark County for selected cases by providing intensive community services. The goal is to keep minority youth from returning to the juvenile system and remain in the community.
- 10) Parent Project-The Court has received training from the Office of the Attorney General to provide a group program to parents and adolescents. The group training and skill sessions were designed by parents for parents. It is intended to provide support for families coming to the attention of Court and Children Services to alleviate the need for more intensive services or removal of the child from the home. Groups are conducted for parents and for adolescents.
- 11) Traumatized Child Task Force-The Court was actively involved in the formation of the Traumatized Child Task Force (TCTF) in 2002. The mission of the Stark County Traumatized Child Task Force is to create a comprehensive continuum of care and a systematic approach for prevention, early identification and treatment of trauma in children. The Judges know that while a youth must be held accountable for his or her actions, it is also important to ask about trauma, and to understand how it has impacted the youth's behavior. Children deserve to have the appropriate community response to their needs and the Stark County Family Court has made this issue a priority by providing ongoing leadership and support to the development of community resources for these children.
- 12) Trauma and loss-The Court along with Northeast Behavioral Health Center, Community Services, Child and Adolescent Center, and other community agency personnel have been collaborating to provide assessments for juveniles who have suffered any trauma in their lives. Events of trauma in children's lives have been shown to impact their behavior and are often left untreated leading to many risky behaviors.

## Programs for Delinquent offenders

- 1) Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST)-This intensive home-based program is operated in cooperation between the Court, Crisis Center of Stark County, and the Stark County Mental Health and Recovery Services Board. This is a model program shown to be effective with juvenile delinquents and their families. They provide intensive services to juveniles and their families in the community preventing the need for removal from their home. There are two components to this program and one unit offers specific treatment for sex offenders.
- 2) Probation Impact- This program partners with local police departments to monitor probationers. Probation Officers ride with law enforcement and do home checks of probationers in the evenings across the county.
- 3) Gang Intervention Program-This program provides two gang intervention specialist Probation Officers and a Stark County TASC substance abuse counselor to provide a collaborative gang intervention strategy that blends surveillance and treatment. Stark County has experienced a serious increase in gang activity and gang violence. Traditional interventions are ineffective because these youth are dedicated to their gang with fewer than 25% ever attempting to leave the gang. Juveniles who have been placed on probation and identified as a possible gang member are referred to the gang intervention program. The intervention is a four-phase structure that decreases the intensity of surveillance and treatment as the youth achieves defined behavior targets. The role of the probation officers is to enforce social controls. Those youth whose initial assessment indicates a need for substance abuse treatment will receive those services from the TASC counselor on an individual basis. The role of the counselor is to provide a trusted person in whom the youth is able to explore their beliefs, identify their needs, and discuss alternative choices to meet those needs. The Probation Officers work closely with law enforcement sharing information and cooperating in monitoring the activities of the juveniles placed in this program.
- 4) Pre-Trial services-This program assists the Court in reducing the number of detention beds used by the county. It provides intensive monitoring and assessment services to juveniles that have been charged with serious offenses. The program is able to intensively supervise juveniles in their own homes instead of them being held in the juvenile attention center.
- 5) Dispositional/Panel Review-Court staff complete an in-depth assessment for each juvenile case considered for a commitment to an institution of the Department of Youth Services. The goal is to reduce commitments to state institutions by presenting other appropriate community alternatives from a panel of Court Supervisors. The assessments included a complete social history, input from parents, prosecutors, defense council, probation and placement, community agencies, and schools. The interview with the child follows the guidelines of the Ohio Youth Assessment System risk instrument. Commitments to the Department of Youth Services have been reduced by over 75% in the period of five years from 2004 to 2009.

- 6) DYS Re-entry program-The Court is partnering with the Ohio Department of Youth Services to conduct planning meetings early in the placement of a juvenile in a state institution. The partnership is to provide a process so that a juvenile will be prepared for his/her release into the community by planning prior to release. Data and information will be exchanged and the Court and DYS are pursuing the ability to use electronic means to eliminate paperwork.
- 7) Studio 2-B- Girl Scouts-This Girl Scout program is offered to delinquent girls currently on probation. The girls assigned to this program and come from a variety of backgrounds, and most have had no exposure to Girl Scouts. Since Studio 2B was begun at Family Court in March of 2004, more than 200 girls have benefited from this innovative program that takes a new approach to reaching and serving girls. Court staff serves as the group's leaders/mentors and say, "Studio 2B provides a place where girls can be themselves while learning positive ways to deal with the many issues they face." They work on cognitive behavior intervention with the girls, and they learn new skills to help them in school and social settings. This is funded in part from the United Way of Stark County.
- 8) Probation Officer Specialists for Sex Offenders-The Court has operated a separate unit of two Juvenile Probation Offices specifically to work with juvenile sex offenders. They collaborate with the Prosecutor's office and the Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health Center in providing monitoring, assessment and treatment for juvenile offenders. They also conduct diversion hearings on sex offender cases when recommended and in cooperation with the Prosecutor's Office.
- 9) Work Connections-The Court partners with the local agencies to provide case managers for youth. The case managers provide tutoring, employment opportunities and occupational skill training for juveniles placed on probation. Their objective is for the juveniles to become gainfully employed.
- 10) Victim Awareness groups-The Court in cooperation with the Stark County Prosecutor's office conducts groups designed to increase offenders understanding for their victims.

#### Alcohol and Drug Programs

- 11) Drug Court-This program was established as a pilot program with RECLAIM grant funds to create a Juvenile Drug Court. This program began operation in June of 2007 in cooperation with the Alcohol and Drug Services Board of Stark County, now known as the Mental Health and Recovery Services Board. Juveniles charged with drug related offenses are screened and a select number of cases are accepted into this program. If a juvenile successfully completes the drug court program they avoid the permanent record created by a conviction.
- 12) Alcohol and Drug Assessments-The Stark County Mental Health and Recovery Services Board and Trillium Services Inc. have cooperated to provide the Court with a trained and certified individual to conduct assessments of juveniles referred from the Court. This

collaborative effort is done to prevent costly and sometimes unnecessary inpatient treatment for juveniles with drug or alcohol problems.

- 13) Options Program-This diversion program offers drug and alcohol education to first time offenders. This is a cooperative program between the Court and schools, and uses a specific curriculum presented in small groups. Court and school personnel run the groups in various locations throughout the county.

## Neglect and Abuse Programs

- 14) Dependency, Neglect, Abuse case flow task force-The Court in collaboration with Children Services, Public Defender and mental health serving agencies, are reviewing all of the factors that determine when and how long a child remains in care of the Children Services.
- 15) Children's Network-The Court is a partner with the Prosecutor's office, Children Services, local law enforcement, and treatment providers to see that sexually abused children receive treatment and appropriate protection. The cooperation often leads to successful prosecution of offenders and the best treatment for the child.
- 16) Stark County Summit on Children-The Court is working together with child serving agencies to provide better outcomes for youth in foster care. This is a collaborative effort between, DJFS, Children Services, the Mental Health and Recovery Services Board, the Stark County Educational Services Center and the Children's Advisory Council. On-going committees are reviewing and making recommendations on issues of schooling, youth to Court and timelines for cases involving dependant, neglected and abused children.
- 17) Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA/GAL)- A Court appointed special Advocate/Guardian Ad Litem is a trained community volunteer who is appointed by a Judge or Magistrate to advocate for the best interests of abused, neglected or dependent children in court proceedings. Ohio law requires that a CASA/GAL be appointed for a child involved in an abuse, neglect, or dependent child case. The Court employs CASA staff to oversee the recruitment, training, assignment and supervision of over 80 volunteers that are involved in the lives of 250 children. Volunteers greatly reduce the guardian costs to the court and county and provide much needed manpower. CASA staff and volunteers in collaboration with other professionals, work to move a child out of temporary placement into a safe permanent home.
- 18) Citizen Review Boards- The Citizen Review Board volunteers are appointed by Family Court Judges to review the status of children in custody of a public or private placement agency. The role of the Board is similar in function to that of a Court Magistrate. They conduct statutory review hearings and make dispositional recommendations. In order to complete the review, the Board hears reports from agencies and all parties to the case before making its recommendations.

## Divorce and Custody

- 19) Family Liaison Specialist- This position was established to assist the Court in managing high conflict divorces with children. Some of the services include coordinating visitation exchanges, review of compliance in domestic violence cases, assess cases for domestic violence, assist in the orientation for mediation, and assign mediators in juvenile cases.
- 20) Divorce Mediation-The Court has been providing mediation to parents with children when they are going through a divorce. This program allows parents to come to mutual decisions about custody, visitation or companionship, and other issues related to the children. It avoids adversarial trials and offers the parties the ability to settle the disputes on their own. Attorney's and trained community counselor's provide mediation at the expense of the parties in the case.
- 21) Parenting Seminar-All parents divorcing must complete a parent education program set up by the Court. This program is operated by community agencies and offered online, and the participants must pay for this program. Two agencies, Trillium Family Solutions of Canton and Community Services work with the Court and continue to offer the Court and participants a much-needed program. The Court also offers an online course for those divorcing parents that cannot attend a class.
- 22) Working Together for Kids- "Working Together for Kids" is a Court program designed for cases in which the parents were never married. When never married parents come to the court for child support, custody, or visitation requests, they will be referred to this program. The Court, through two evening sessions, offers training, mediation and other important skills to assist parents. The goal of the program is to help parents make decisions about parenting time with their child/ren. The Working Together for Kids Program requires attendance at two sessions. At the first session, a magistrate and psychologist discuss parent's rights, responsibilities, parenting strategies, and communication skills. The second session offers a question and answer period and then time to meet with a mediator. If an agreement is not reached through mediation, then the case goes through the regular court process. Resolution through trial will take much longer and be more costly than through mediation. The goal of this program is to make parents think about how decisions about companionship will affect the child.
- 23) Custody Clinic-The Court has developed an on-going program to assist "pro se" (litigants without legal representation) in obtaining custody orders. Partnering with the Legal Aid and the Stark County Child Support Enforcement Agency (CSEA), parents, grandparents and relatives are able at no cost to obtain custody orders to enable them to enroll the children in school and receive medical care. The involvement of CSEA insures that child support orders are issued and correct. This program was recognized by the Ohio Child Support Enforcement Director's Association as a statewide "best practice".

- 24) Visitation Center-The Court in cooperation with Safe Haven of Stark County Inc., offers visits and exchanges for separated parents. Safe Haven offers supervised visits and supervised exchanges designed to assure that a child can have safe contact with a divorced, separated, or absent parent without having to be put in the middle of the parents' conflicts or other problems. It is the child's need that is paramount in making any decisions regarding the need for such supervision and a neutral place reduces tension for the child. Safe Haven began offering supervised visits in February 2005, with the support of the Stark County Family Court, Trinity Lutheran Church of Canton and the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton. Supervised access addresses a number of different concerns of the Court which may arise in Domestic Relations and Juvenile Court cases. Supervised visits may be appropriate in cases where there are concerns about the safety of the child and/or the custodial parent, where the non-custodial parent has a drug or alcohol problem or a psychiatric condition, and where there has been a lengthy separation between the parent and the child; or there is a risk of abduction.